

Impact case study (REF3b)

Institution: Newcastle University
Unit of Assessment: UoA34 Art and Design: History, Practice and Theory
Title of case study: Challenging our expectations: presenting alternative narratives and world views through artistic production and curation
1. Summary of the impact

Through the public exhibition of his own video practice and his dialogic approach to the presentation of other artists' works Richard Grayson's research projects as an artist-curator have impacted significantly on **cultural life** and **public discourse** around contemporary visual arts in the UK and internationally. Specifically his research has:

- a) provided opportunities for audiences to experience new artworks and exhibitions which question conventional social narratives and world views;
- b) through exhibitions, critical writing and gallery discussions, contributed to the development of public understanding of contemporary visual art.

This case study focuses particularly on the positive critical reception and longer-term impacts generated by Grayson's video work, *The Golden Space City of God* (2009) and two recent curatorial projects, *Polytechnic* (2011) and *Revolver* (2012).

2. Underpinning research

Richard Grayson undertakes practice-based research as an artist-curator. He joined the Newcastle University Fine Art department as an AHRB Research Fellow in 2003 and since 2007 holds a permanent position at the university as Bartlett Research Fellow. The reach and significance of Grayson's research is evidenced by the positive critical reception of his artworks and curated exhibitions within the international arts press and by on-going invitations to work with respected galleries in the UK and abroad, including his recent high profile appointment as Curator of the Adelaide International 2014, Australia.

Grayson's artistic and curatorial research interrogates personal belief systems and the ways that art practices act as a point of translation between subjective, individual views of the world and wider societal models. The research focuses primarily on the idea of alternative narratives: be these fantastical, philosophical, psychological or theological. It also interrogates key dualities in art history and theory, such as the tensions between the narratives of the Western rationalist tradition and faith-based systems and ideologies.



In his own video works, such as *The Golden Space City of God* (2009) (pictured above left, video still) **(1)**, for example, Grayson is specifically interested in exploring and interrogating the apocalyptic prophecy of Christian religious sects, and the broader political agency of the Christian Right. Through image, words and music, these videos examine the role of language as a tool for making sense of the world and the ways that cultural expression creates a flow from subjective and personal constructions into the wider social realm: For *The Golden Space City of God*, Grayson created a choral work using text from a Christian cult website which detailed predictions of events leading up to the end of the world; In *The Magpie Index* (2010) (pictured above right, installation, Matt's Gallery) **(2)**, Grayson explored the ways in which idiosyncratic visions are developed and

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how these might shape the shared beliefs of a cultural movement. Based on the life of singer Roy Harper the work moves from the biographical to the social presenting Harper in the frame of the radical non-conformist, the visionary and the outsider.

This research into personal and social narratives, and the power play between artists, art objects and audiences, is further articulated in Grayson's curatorial projects, the Arts Council and Hayward Gallery touring survey shows *This Will Not Happen Without You* (3) and *A Secret Service* (both 2006/07) (4), and gallery exhibitions, *Polytechnic* (2010) (5) and *Revolver* (2012) (6); *This Will Not Happen Without You* analysed the evolution of the six-artist collective The Basement Group into the artist-led agency Projects UK, and Locus+; *A Secret Service: Art, Compulsion, Concealment* presented works by 15 international artists whose practices operate on different constructions of audience, exploring the idea of secret, hidden and private worlds (artists included Sophie Calle, Susan Hiller, Kurt Schwitters and Oskar Voll); *Polytechnic* showed how personal and political concerns informed by the radical politics of the 1970s-80s influenced artists' engagement with experimental media (artists included Ian Breakwell, Marc Camille Chaimowicz, Catherine Elwes, and Stuart Marshall); while *Revolver* worked to generate shifting associations over time and space between ten emerging and established artists, combining existing and newly commissioned work from 1983-2012, (artists included William Cobbing, Layla Curtis, Graham Gussin, Juneau Projects, and Rachel Lowe, and Tai Shani).

3. References to the research

Artworks by Richard Grayson:

- (1) *The Golden Space City of God*, commissioned by Art Pace, San Antonio, USA and Matt's Gallery London (2009) <http://vimeo.com/41554274>
- (2) *The Magpie Index*, commissioned by the De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill, and Locus+ (2010). Matt's Gallery, London (2012). <http://ensemble.va.com.au/Grayson/art/MagpieIndex.html>

Curatorial projects:

- (3) *This Will Not Happen Without You*. Arts Council UK Touring exhibition: John Hansard Gallery, Southampton; Hatton Gallery, Newcastle; and Interface, Belfast (2006/07). Catalogue, Locus+ (2007) http://ensemble.va.com.au/Grayson/grayson/curatorial_TWNHWY.html
- (4) *A Secret Service*. Hayward Gallery Touring Exhibition produced in collaboration with the Hatton Gallery, Newcastle (2006/07). http://ensemble.va.com.au/Grayson/grayson/curatorial_SServ.html
- (5) *Polytechnic*. Raven Row, London (2010). <http://www.ravenrow.org/exhibition/polytechnic/>
- (6) *Revolver*. Matt's Gallery, London (2012). <http://www.mattsgallery.org/revolver/revolver.php>

Grants:

- Australia Council Bursary: 'Messiah' (2004) A\$30k
- AHRC: 'New Cathedral: an investigation into the social construction of belief systems and the contemporary video installation.' (2009) £16k. (PI: Richard Grayson)
- Arts Council England: New work Grant (2009), £5k;
- ArtPace Texas, USA: 'New Cathedral' International residency (2009) 60kUS\$
- Henry Moore Foundation: (2009) £6k
- Arts Council England Grant: 'This Will Not Happen Without You', (2006-7) £50k (with Locus+)
- Henry Moore Foundation: 'Revolver' (2012), £8k (with Matts Gallery)

4. Details of the impact

Impact on UK and international cultural life: new artistic expression and interpretation

New artistic expression: Grayson's art works have been widely exhibited and have been experienced by a broad international audience. For example, his video *The Golden Space City of God* has been showcased internationally at: Te Tuhi Centre for the Arts, Manukau City, New Zealand (attracts 170,000 visitors annually); Art Pace, San Antonio, Texas, USA; Matt's Gallery, London (all 2009); Kunstmuseum des Kantons Thurgau, Switzerland; Yuill/Crowley Gallery, Sydney, Australia (both 2010); the Kiev Biennale 2012 (135,000 visitors); at Choral Visual: The Seimans Foundation, Buenos Aires and His Master's Voice, Hanover Media KunstVerein,

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Germany (2013). *The Golden Space City of God* was nominated as the standout show of 2009 by Time Out, London’s influential listings magazine. Art Critic Gabriel Coxhead wrote: “Grayson’s filmed libretto, compiled from online millennialist prophesy, was by turns majestic and melancholic, amusing and terrifying...” **(IMP1)**. Meanwhile Waldemar Januszczak, reviewing this work in the Sunday Times, described it as: “startling, shocking, distressing, unforgettable.” **(IMP2)**.

Extracts from a selection of Grayson’s video works are also accessible online e.g. via the popular video sharing sites YouTube and Vimeo, making his work available to audiences beyond the gallery exhibition world. For example: The video of Grayson’s introduction to *Messiah* in Sydney (www.youtube.com/watch?v=-0nNadFyfuE) has 381 views to date; An extract from Grayson’s work *The Magpie Index* has 465 views , one viewer commenting that the work is: “Absolute genius the piece resounds with common sense and intellect, reassuring there are others with these views :)” **(IMP3)**.

The artistic value and importance of these works is evidenced in purchases by prestigious collections in the UK and in Australia. *The Golden Space City of God* was acquired for the Arts Council Collection in 2010 and subsequently by the Art Gallery of Western Australia (AGWA) for its international collection. *Messiah* was also purchased for AGWA, after its re-presentation in ‘Songs of Survival’ at the 2010 Sydney Biennale.

Re-evaluation of British art and artists: Grayson’s curated group show ‘Polytechnic’ at Raven Row, 2011, (pictured below left, work by Marc Chaimowicz) presenting a re-evaluation of British video and mixed media art from 1970s-80s, was selected by the prestigious international art magazine Frieze (readership 71,000) as one of the most important moving image exhibitions of 2011: “Artist Richard Grayson curated a show that asked us to re-examine what British art – and Britain generally – looked like in the late 1970s and early ’80s....In common with many of the year’s best moving-image-related shows and screenings, ‘Polytechnic’ taught us how much we still have to learn about the history of film and video’s dialogues with the other arts.’ (Mike Sperlinger Best of Year Frieze Magazine 2011 Issue 136.) **(IMP4)**.



New curatorial models: Grayson’s curatorial collaboration with Robin Klassnik (Director, Matt’s Gallery), the three-part exhibition ‘Revolver’, (pictured above, right, work by Juneau Projects) was the first of a new series of discursive and experimental initiatives for the gallery. Klassnik confirmed that ‘Revolver’ was a “developmental and experimental curatorial project investigating and effecting new ways of working for the organisation [Matt’s Gallery]. This new working model was an integral part of our successful National Portfolio bid to Arts Council England in 2011 [...] the success of the collaboration [with Grayson] has significantly informed the future operations of the organisation as it offered possibilities of creating a hybrid operation, a site for cross-pollination and new inputs” **(IMP5)**. Partly a response to the new reduced funding climate for the arts this exhibition broke away from Matt’s’ more usual long-term commissioning approach to solo exhibition-making, to present a sequence of older and recent works by ten very contrasting artists in three consecutive mini-exhibitions.

The international significance and impact of Grayson’s curatorial approach has been recognized in his recent appointment as Curator of the Adelaide International 2014, Australia. Announcing this appointment in May 2013, Adelaide Festival Artistic Director David Sefton commented on the value that Grayson’s eclectic curatorial approach would bring to the wider festival, saying: “I wanted to find someone to curate Adelaide International that would work in collaboration to bring the

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performing and visual arts in the festival closer together” (IMP6).

Impact on public discourse: developing public understanding of contemporary arts practice

Published critical writing: As a curator Grayson is an active voice in published critical debate around the contemporary visual arts. He is a regular contributor to *Art Monthly* (the leading UK contemporary art magazine, readership 20,000) and *Broadsheet* magazine (Australia). His essay ‘So Here we are the end Planet Finance’ (first published in *Broadsheet* Australia and *Art Monthly*) was widely circulated on the internet, with over 1964 online ‘reads’ to date (IMP7). The recognition and influence of Grayson’s curatorial approach is also evidenced by frequent invitations by galleries to write for other artists’ catalogues. These include catalogue essays for: Susan Hiller, Tate Britain; Mike Nelson, Whitechapel Art Gallery; Mark Wallinger, Aargauer Kunsthaus, Switzerland.

Public arts debate: Grayson’s artistic and curatorial projects have been widely discussed contributing to international public debate on the contemporary visual arts, including in the influential publications *Art Monthly*, *Artforum*, *Frieze*, and *Art in America* (IMP8). As deliberately provocative pieces, Grayson’s own artworks have generated debate within and beyond his immediate gallery audience, particularly among those with religious beliefs, for example. The exhibition of his work *Messiah* at the De La Warr Pavilion (2010) stimulated a commentary on the De La Warr gallery blog about the way the work had challenged discussion among a group of Christian visitors (O’ Donoghue, http://dlwp.blogspot.co.uk/2010_02_21_archive.html). Writing about Grayson’s *The Golden Space City of God* for the journal *Art and Christianity* Joseph Watson (V&A curator and an arts advisor to St Paul’s Cathedral) wrote: “[this work] calls us not only to re-examine our own beliefs....but identifies the powerful role sound and space have held in religion and the formation of collective identities. If churches and cathedrals have provided the history of the relationship of sound and space, is it the case that spaces of art will become (perhaps already are) the future prophetic spaces of our culture; the communal spaces of harmony and dissonance?” (IMP9).

Beyond the exhibition of his own and others’ artworks, Grayson also has active interaction with public audiences through lectures, artist interviews and participation in panel discussions and research conferences (e.g.: Venice Biennale, 2013; Marginalia, Cambridge School of Art, Anglia Ruskin University, 2011; Chisenhale Gallery, London, 2010; Tate Modern, 2009; Tate Liverpool, 2008.) These events attract a broad arts audience, including artists, students and curators as well as more general gallery visitors.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- (IMP1) Magazine article: Time Out Best of the year '09, 17—30 December 2009. Available on request.
- (IMP2) Review: Waldemar Januszczak, ‘Give credit to the crunch’ *Sunday Times*, (17 May 2009). Review of *The Golden Space City of God*, Matt’s Gallery, London (2009). Available on request.
- (IMP3) Views and viewer comment on Grayson’s video work *The Magpie Index*. Available at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=pPUmBUFiVcQ.
- (IMP4) Press file: reviews of the exhibition ‘Polytechnic’, Raven Row, (2011). Quote (p.3).
- (IMP5) Factual statement from Director, Matt’s Gallery.
- (IMP6) Media release: ‘2014 Adelaide Biennial and Adelaide International Curators Announced’. (13 May 2012). Quote from David Sefton, Adelaide Festival 2014 Director, on Richard Grayson’s appointment.
- (IMP7) Online essay by Richard Grayson: ‘So Here we are the end Planet Finance’. Available at: http://undergrowth.org/the_end_of_planet_finance_richard_grayson
- (IMP8) Richard Grayson Selected Bibliography: A list of exhibition reviews 2008-2012.
- (IMP9) Exhibition review: Watson, J (2009) ‘The Golden Space City of God’, *Art and Christianity* (No.59, Autumn). Available on request.